



RESTAURANTS

Subscribe
ALL ACCESS - SIGN IN

Make cooking effortless.

Every week, we send you a box of chef-prepped meals for your Tovala to cook.

Tovala

Christopher Kimball: Bow Ties, Recipes, and Lawsuits

For this beloved TV chef, life after *America's Test Kitchen* is no piece of cake.

by **ALEXANDRA HALL** • 11/20/2016, 6:30 a.m.

Devoted foodies and restaurant newbies love The Feed. Sign-up now for our twice weekly newsletter.

EMAIL ADDRESS SUBSCRIBE



Photograph by Adam DeTour

It was somewhere in St. Louis that Christopher Kimball came right out and admitted he's simply terrible with names. "I even mix up the names of my four kids on occasion," said the famously nerdy and nationally renowned TV personality, darting among events on a nine-city tour to sell his latest culinary venture, called Milk Street Kitchen. "My grandfather used to use the dog's name when referring to my mother," he offered as a folksy excuse. "Bad genes!"

Warmth and fuzziness have never been Kimball's strongest selling points. Even so, on a grueling tour during which the 65-year-old had been apart from his kids—whatever their names are—for weeks, he'd spoken to so many strangers that he could easily be forgiven for not remembering his own name. From Portland, Maine, to Seattle, he'd pitched his company to countless PBS affiliates and live audiences before returning home to Boston, where he's shooting his new TV show at his offices on Milk Street, not far from the Harborwalk.

This, of course, is hardly Kimball's first rodeo. Widely considered one of the country's most influential home-cooking icons, he is a beloved founder of the PBS show *America's Test Kitchen* and *Cook's Illustrated* magazine, as well as the publisher of no fewer than 30 cookbooks. Over the course of more than 20 years, the New Englander toured the country, hosted a nationally syndicated radio show, and beamed into people's homes through their televisions, earning a reputation as the maestro of meticulous, no-nonsense, classic, middlebrow American cooking. Rigidly rooted in the fundamentals of old-school technique, Kimball was famous before today's superstar food personalities—Bobby Flay, Rachael Ray, Mario Batali, all of them. He found a niche as our most persnickety and trusted source of straightforward and reliable recipes, thanks to a strict regimen of testing, retesting, and re-retesting dishes as many times as necessary to achieve the perfect result.

Oh, and let's not forget the props and played-up quirks. Kimball's signature prim bow ties, round wire-rimmed spectacles, and quasi-erudite demeanor on camera led the *New York Times* to write that he "looks like someone who might've sold homeowners' insurance to Calvin Coolidge." Combined with the highly distinctive, highly controlled, unflashy graphics and editorial voice of his magazines, Kimball's persona helped him secure a lock on the intersection of personal branding and industry positioning.

Then came the ousting, Kimball says. A little more than a year ago, Boston Common Press, ATK's Brookline-based parent company, unceremoniously informed him that his services were no longer required.

All of which explains why—after a short hiatus between gigs—Kimball found himself on a frenetic cross-country tour late last summer reintroducing himself to the public with Milk Street Kitchen. "My cooking has completely changed in the last five years," he says, referring to both his personal cooking philosophy and his fledgling new business. "I finally realized that the world offers almost infinite possibilities in how to think about food and how to prepare it. I still think that apple pie is one of the greatest culinary ideas of all time, but I want to introduce home cooks to all the other options."

While Kimball may have "finally realized" that the world is more than just roast chicken and pie à la mode, the food and media culture is miles ahead of where it was when he started out nearly four decades ago. Those "other options" he talks so enthusiastically about are already in front of us, thanks to the onslaught of 24-hour food TV networks, YouTube classes, blogs, vlogs, magazines both online and off, and podcasts spotlighting every possible way to debone a duck, forage for mushrooms, whip up an easy version of coq au vin, and, yes, make a classic apple pie from scratch.

Kimball's obstacles don't stop there. This fall, ATK filed a lawsuit in state court accusing Kimball of "literally and conceptually" ripping off the information and opportunities that he helped create for ATK and simply duplicating them at what has come to be called Christopher Kimball's Milk Street. Kimball's new company is also facing a separate trademark lawsuit in federal court that threatens to strip away the venture's very name before it even has a chance.

Over the years, Kimball's allure has always been the trustworthy, brainy yet plainspoken honesty of his character, and the recipes he's offered in that same spirit. Business is still business, though, and now he must prove himself all over again without the adrenaline-fueled cooking battles, the over-the-top charisma, and the *You-can-make-it-in-under-30-minutes-on-a-weeknight* promises that dominate today's culinary mediascape. Will Kimball be able to build a new brand without pilfering from his previous one? With more TV shows and celebrity chefs to turn to for cooking advice than ever before, it remains to be seen whether anyone will follow. Bye, bye, American Pie. Hello, Milk Street.

Every cook, home or professional, has an ethos, from Auguste Escoffier's organized discipline to Anthony Bourdain's cook-from-the-gut bravado. By contrast, Kimball's public persona has always been one of proud dispassion. "Cooking isn't creative, and it isn't easy," he's said. "It's serious, and it's hard to do well, just as everything worth doing is damn hard."

Hard work has always been the fulcrum of Kimball's meandering career. Unlike many of his peers, he didn't come up through the food industry: Instead of tattoo-festooned line cooks and the notorious *Lord of the Flies*-like culture of professional kitchens, Kimball chose academia and business. After attending Phillips Exeter, he went to Columbia University and majored in primitive art before Cornell accepted him into its Oceanic art PhD program. "I was told that I'd never find a job in that field—by Cornell, thank you!—and then got a job running a small company that gave seminars on publishing-related topics," he says. "I always loved cooking and felt that nobody was publishing a real cooking magazine—as opposed to a food magazine."

He was right; at the time, so-called food magazines catered to wealthy advertisers and published mostly lifestyle, travel, and entertainment stories. Kimball's concept—a magazine that centered on the recipes themselves, with no glossy food-porn photos and no flashy ads (no ads at all, for that matter, with revenue coming entirely from subscriptions)—was downright revolutionary. The result was *Cook's Illustrated*, which premiered in 1993. In a quickly ballooning food industry that fed on cults of personality, Kimball emerged as a no-frills antidote and a champion of trustworthy New England pragmatism. "I have no interest whatsoever in the cult of personality," Kimball insists. "There's a huge difference between [that and] working hard and helping people to cook better at home."

Home cooks loved it. So much so, in fact, that PBS came knocking with an eye toward a TV show starring Kimball. Next came the spinoff magazine, *Cook's Country*, and a slew of cookbooks. Since the founding of ATK, according to the lawsuit filed in state court, Kimball has been paid more than \$30 million in partnership distributions. By the time America's Test Kitchen and Boston Common Press showed him the door in 2015, *Cook's Illustrated* and *Cook's Country* had more than 1.4 million combined paid subscribers. Both sides agreed Kimball's final act would be to host the 2016 TV season.

Pages: 1 2

Read More About:

- Long Reads
- Profiles

You Might Also Like



Getting Your COVID-19 Vaccination? Here's a Delicious, Post-Shot Treat near Each Site



10 Boston Restaurants Offering Great Takeout for Christmas



Eight Fun Takeout Ideas near Boston-Area Beaches



Throw Away Coffee? Not If This One Is Good



10 Boston Restaurants Offering Great Takeout for Christmas

IN THIS SECTION



You have read 4 of 4 complimentary articles.

Subscribe or login for unlimited access to bostonmagazine.com.